

European Perspectives on the Ottoman House

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces some European receptions of the typology of housing generally referred to as Ottoman or Turkish. It discusses the regional developments in the Balkans, with a focus on Albania, and particularly the examples of Gjirokastra. But it also makes the connection to the Swedish reception of the pavilions, or kiosks, of the Ottoman sultans of early 18th century. The Swedish king Charles XII, who in the years around 1710 was staying in today's Moldavia basically as a guest of the sultan, sent an expedition to Istanbul. The officer/architect Cornelius Loos documented some important architectural structures, not least the sultan's kiosks. Apparently the ideal of comfortable, informal living represented an idea that was meant to reform Swedish royal culture, indirectly making a connection also to representative housing in the Balkans. The ideal became a component in early modern housing development, and this paper finally suggests some successions into 20th century modernity.

KEYWORDS:

Ottoman house, vernacular architecture, kiosk, Gjirokastra, Cornelius Loos

1 INTRODUCTION

The house type often referred to as Ottoman or Turkish could arguably be considered as being more widely represented in today's Europe than in Anatolia or the Eastern Mediterranean. Although important Turkish sites like Safranbolu show many interesting examples, Albanian sites like Gjirokastra and Berat along with other Balkan sites are among the most important centres of this house type. The question of its origins has been debated, and significant features of the house type can be found in both Central Asian settlements and in Byzantine and other Mediterranean precedents. The relevance of the "Ottoman" label, however, is stressed by the fact that Turkish names for various space types and elements are used not only in today's Turkey but also in the Balkan, including Albanian, context.

One feature of this house type distinguishes it from other urban and rural settlements in the Middle East and Central Asia. This is its extrovert approach, where the main living areas in the upper floor are expressively opening towards views and surroundings. The combination of a secluded ground floor used for storage and economy purposes, and the overhanging upper floor for family life and representation, forms a combination providing integrity and protection as well as interaction with the surrounding environment. It could even be described as a synthesis of privacy, the *haram* concept of Arabic or Islamic urban culture, and the public or semi-public urban interaction of European urban housing culture.

Along with the interpretation of Central Asian "Turkish" roots of the Ottoman house type, it has been suggested that the resettlement of Constantinople/Istanbul after the Ottoman conquest in 1453 formed one background. The brick walls fencing the Byzantine private lots from streets and surroundings were left standing, while new houses were constructed with increased density,

overhanging and opening their upper storeys to streets and gardens. With this interpretation, regarding Istanbul as the centre, the spread with equal force to east and west becomes in a way more reasonable than with the unidirectional east to west influence.

In any case, one feature worth considering is the importance of topography. The house type is well suited for all kinds of dense urban settlements, but especially so for sloping sites where views towards surroundings become predominant. This topographic feature marks many sites in Turkey, such as Safranbolu, and likewise in the Balkans, in examples like Ohrid, Gjakova or Sarajevo, but even more in the Albanian examples, in Berat and Gjirokastra.

A significant feature of the house type can be said to be the combination of the quality of the basically single space house, allowing light and views often from three sides, with the multi-room complex for large families and a diversity of functions. The house type can be regarded as basically an organized cluster of single space units, framing a core of a slightly more public status, termed the *sofa*. This multi-functional capacity within a strong typological framework also has allowed for changes of use and habits through time and along the scale of private and public purposes. One example to illustrate this may be the Babameto House in Gjirokastra, recently restored for public use (with involvement from the Swedish NGO Cultural Heritage without Borders).

This wide relevance of the Ottoman house also applies to the social scale, where the peasant's or craftsman's home may share many features, including the scale, with palaces for rulers, including even the Ottoman sultans themselves. Differences may be found mainly in precious details such as textiles, tiles or other ornament. In relation to Western European architectural culture, with strongly marked differences between the homes for monarchs, aristocracy, urban and rural dwellers, this uniformity or at least strong affinity between categories is remarkable. Its impact spread not only in the Balkans and central Europe, but also in Western and Northern regions.

2 DRAWINGS BY CORNELIUS LOOS 1710-11

One such case is the Swedish monarchy, during the reign of Charles XII in the early 18th century. In 1709, after having lost the battle at Poltava against the Russian army, the king and his entourage were settling in Varnitsa in present Moldavia, at that time under Ottoman control. The Swedes were basically guests of the sultan, although the alliance with the Ottoman empire was not without complications. During the stay, basically lasting four years, the king sent an expedition to the capital in order to document the city and its architectural highlights. Chief of the expedition was the fortification officer Cornelius Loos, who produced a large number of drawings from Istanbul and from a journey across the Mediterranean. Some 40 of these are preserved, and a large portion show the sultan's pavilions or kiosks, that were apparently a chief interest for the king. These are of course basically one room pavilions, but sharing the main features of the ordinary Ottoman house that, as said, can be defined as a cluster of single room buildings. The ideal of relaxed, comfortable living in spaces of elaborate design and beautifully situated, but in a modest scale, became introduced as a European courtly ideal.

2.1 Tersana

Four preserved drawings represent the Sultan's pavilions of the shipyard or arsenal, Tersana, along the Golden Horn. The first constructions began during the reign of Sultan Ahmet I, probably in 1613. A second pavilion was added during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim, in the 1640's. During the later 18th century the complex was reduced to one pavilion, which was largely rebuilt. The architectural layout of the 17th century complex is documented in some miniatures by Levni and others, while the Loos drawings form primary sources for its interiors. The drawings by Loos present frontal perspectives of two major interior spaces, one of them seen from two opposite positions. The fourth drawing shows the plan and interior perspectives of the hammam.

The single interior view appears to be the oldest. It seems to have a marble floor and a relief dado, probably also in marble. This unusual feature, the rectangular slabs of the stone wall panelling, may in fact be the source of the name “mirror saray” given by Loos and by other sources. Besides this feature, probably a reminiscence from the kind of marble panelling inspired from Mamluk sources after the conquest of Syria and Egypt in the early 16th century, another sign of an early date is the prominent Bursa arch subdividing the main space from the *eyvan*. Two other prominent architectural elements are the fireplace dominating the left sidewall and the frieze on top of the wall tiling. It is shaped like an entablature consisting of an architrave, the frieze proper shown by Loos with x-shaped feather-like elements, and a crowning cornice topped by star-like elements. A similar frieze or architrave is seen on the façade of the Sultaniye kiosk, as represented in another drawing by Lo

The ceiling is flat and coffered with small squares except for a larger square element marking the centre. Four remarkably low secondary doors are symmetrically placed on the sidewalls. The *eyvan* with raised floor repeats the same architecture, but displays two niches on each of the windowless sidewalls, while the two top windows on the back wall are made to cut through the tile frieze. Among other details in the lower part of the room is a small fountain.

The upper kiosk, in all likelihood, is then the oldest building, the one constructed in 1613. It can be recognized as shown – very simplified – in some of the miniatures by Levni, with a pyramid roof and a chimney to the left. This is a building corresponding to the so-called bedroom of Murat III in the Topkapı Saray, rather than to the open, porticoed pavilions like the Baghdad kiosk, built in the 1630's.

The Baghdad kiosk, instead, found its correspondent in the much more widely recorded shore pavilion of the Tersana. This is the building represented in the other two interiors by Loos. In this space floors are covered by carpets, except for the basin of a fountain at the north end. Walls have fairly simple square tiling, interrupted by openings including rows of niches. A plain horizontal band crowns the tiled lower part of the wall and forms the base of the upper row of arched windows. The ceiling has a shallow octagonal dome.

The fourth drawing of the Tersana shows the plan and three-domed interior of the hammam. If certain parallels between the Topkapı and Tersana sarays can be drawn, the difference is not only in size and complexity. The comparative simplicity of the Tersana shows also in the interior decoration, most conspicuously perhaps in the plain brick walls exposed in the upper parts of the spaces.

2.2 Fenerbahçe

Like the Sultaniye kiosk, Fenerbahçe is represented by Loos in two perspective drawings, one from a certain distance, the other frontal and viewing into the portico. In this case the location is clearly stated as “Fenari Bagtschiesi” and “Fanarj Kiosk”. The difference in giving the name between the two drawings may indicate, however, that they were not produced as belonging together, an hypothesis also supported by the fact that the two images are only with some difficulty recognizable as being representations of the same architectural object.

Like Sultaniye, the kiosk at Fenerbahçe was essentially from the period of Süleyman, but likewise going back to ancient times. Justinian had built a summer palace, probably the background for a deliberate revival when Mehmet II made the site into a royal garden, to be architecturally furnished by his followers. The place is mentioned, and shown in the panorama by Grelot, but the images by Loos are essential documents.

The over all view shows at its very centre a fairly large structure with a pyramid roof supported by a multitude of pillars. Two smaller buildings are seen close to the main building, on the right side. The perspective of the main building is flattened out, so that the short and long sides are both seen more or less in elevation. The long side displays a subdivision into an open porch, to the left, and a closed part to the right. The wall of closed parts facing the portico is, again, shown in flattened perspective like an elevation, whereby its central opening takes the place at the very centre of the drawing. This formalism is contrasted by some external features. One of these is a simple, low

fence, framing the building in fragments and in a slightly curved form. Also the two minor buildings, an outer framing wall with an entrance porch, and the grouping of trees as well as surrounding water and landscape belong to the irregular features emphasizing the significance of the central pavilion.

In the frontal perspective showing this pavilion, displaying its interior, its proportions are more vertical. At least this is the case with the elevation of the short side – the, as usual, very wide angled central perspective may on the other hand give the impression of being almost corridor-like in depth. In reality the open part of the kiosk seems to consist of a front part with a central fountain and an inner part with a wall fountain connecting by a central channel to the outer one. These two compartments of the portico are subdivided by a three partite arcade with Bursa type arches. The floor is covered by individual carpets, while the ceiling is shown with a simple rectangular grid of panels. The pillars appear simple, rectangular, in both views.

In the perspective focusing on the interior, as opposed to the more distant view, the external elements seem as geometrically organised as the inner space. Whereas the view of the site emphasizes local features such as the waters and surroundings plus two figures walking in the garden, the interior view appears generalized into a piece of architecture with a strong relationship to a garden, to be conveniently translated into other contexts.

This aspect is strengthened by the drawing of an anonymous kiosk, with striking similarities to the Fenerbahçe but reduced in scale while enriched in decorative elements.

2.3 Sultaniye

Two drawings by Loos present a kiosk built by the Bosphoros, one of them a distant bird's eye view, the other a frontal view. The inscriptions mention the Bosphoros and the Black Sea, but give no mention of the name or exact location. Obviously, however, this is the kiosk built in early 16th century in the first years of Süleyman at Sultaniye. Even if some important later examples of royal kiosks closely related to waters were added in later 16th and 17th centuries, this two hundred year old structure must have seemed to Loos to be the most radical in this aspect.

The Sultaniye kiosk belongs to the same basic typology as the Baghdad and Yali kiosks, with a cross-shaped domed core, with tile revetments and an outer portico. It also has, however, some individual features. As reported by 17th century visitors, the foundation walls lifting the pavilion above the water contained spolia from ancient columns, and the remarkably classical marble columns forming the arcades of the portico were beautiful. Inscriptions were said to contain praises of wine. By the time of the visit by Loos it is likely to have had a special reputation.

2.4 Unknown kiosk

One frontal exterior view represents a small kiosk situated, according to the inscription, near Istanbul.

The porch has a square plan, its inner third raised and covered by a carpet, the rest presented with the kind of alternating dark and light rectangles seen e g in the Tersana hammam. In several ways, however, the drawing shows similarities with perspective of the Fenerbahçe. In both cases the kiosk is framed by rows of trees and by low, simple fences. Both also have rounded eaves, a feature not very commonly seen. (In preserved examples of the Ottoman house type, it is particularly frequent in Albanian examples such as in Gjirokastra.) The interiors of their porches have centrally placed fountains, and their central axes are emphasized also by sections of the floors protruding from a main rectangular shape. In the anonymous kiosk this protruding section has stairs to both sides.

The most conspicuous feature of this modestly sized kiosk is perhaps the octagonal, fluted interior dome. Normally the dome would belong to the interior space, while the portico has a flat ceiling. The domed portico is of course often seen in Ottoman mosques. Here is a rare case where it is used to emphasize the open portico of the kiosk.

Whether this kiosk also has an interior dome is not seen. The central door to the interior is open, exposing the window on the central axis at the rear end. This window, as well as the two on both sides of the door opening, is shown being closed by decorative shutters. The most conspicuous decorative element on façade of the closed part is however the ogee arches above all three openings, framing richly ornamental tiles.

3 THE OTTOMAN/BALKAN HOUSE AND INTERNATIONAL MODERNITY

The drawings by Cornelius Loos form an early example of the perception of the Ottoman dwelling in European modernity. Later examples are represented by 20th century architects, such as Adolf Loos (coincidentally sharing his the last name with the Swedish officer of two centuries earlier) whose “Raumplan” carries echoes of the Balkan Ottoman house. Not least the journey to the East by Le Corbusier in 1911 brought the experience and the typology of the Ottoman house into the centre of modern European architectural developments.

4 CONCLUSION

The house type usually termed Ottoman forms a Mediterranean and European heritage of great significance. Its roots can be debated, but as a typology and a fundamental type of multifunctional dwelling space it belongs to a wide tradition represented by rural and urban housing related to all social classes including even the Ottoman rulers. Its historiography is still awaiting some further contributions, but also a future as an element contributing to modern and post-modern international dwelling culture is to be expected.

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